Speaker Hits the Books to Defend His Attacks

By Kenneth J. Cooper
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Challenged on his facts, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) did what any college professor under fire would do. He cited his sources.

Gingrich arrived at his daily news briefing yesterday with three books tucked under his arm. He stacked the volumes on the table and rattled off pages from each as support for his recent statements blaming liberal Democrats for failures in public schooling and public housing.

His criticisms had erroneously suggested that Democrats created both troubled systems even though public education dates to the 1600s, long before either major political party was established, and a seminal public housing bill passed Congress in 1949 with bipartisan sponsorship.

Gingrich said his suggested readings of the day, written by conservative critics of federal antipoverty programs, explained "why I talked about the '60s" as the starting point of decline in schools and housing projects.

"Many liberal Democrats over the years supported a series of well-meaning programs, often building on the programs of the '20s, '30s and '40s . . . so that in the '60s and beyond they changed the nature of those programs, with the result that you have today an absolute tragedy for the poor," Gingrich said.

The three books he cited are: "Losing Ground" by Charles Murray, "The Tragedy of American Compassion" by Marvin Olasky and "The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass" by Myron Magnet.

"Those are the three works. You may not agree with them, but at least they are serious," Gingrich told reporters.

A Gingrich aide said the speaker selected passages from the books that describe a shift in public attitudes from a multipronged response to poverty involving family, community and government to a government-dominated strategy, beginning with President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society.

The readings support that general theme but hardly mention public schools or public housing projects, the specific subjects of remarks Gingrich made Monday and Tuesday. Nor do the conservative social theorists contradict basic historical facts about education and housing available in such nonpartisan sources as standard encyclopedias, the Congressional Quarterly Almanac and the Senate historian's office.

Olasky, a journalism professor at the University of Texas, argues in a chapter titled "Revolution—and Its Heartbreak" that government officials, civil libertarians and community action leaders waged a successful "war on shame" in the 1960s to remove welfare's stigma. "Suddenly it became better to accept welfare than to take in laundry," he wrote.

Murray, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, said in his book's prologue that the nation's poverty rate was 13 percent in 1968 when Johnson left office and remained the same in 1980 after "expenditures on social welfare quadrupled." He presented no estimate of what the 1980 poverty rate might have been without that spending.

"We tried to provide more for the poor and produced more poor instead. We tried to remove the barriers to escape from poverty, and inadvertently built a trap," Murray wrote.

A passage written by Magnet, a Manhattan Institute fellow, cited 40 percent to 60 percent dropout rates at inner-city high schools and declines in black male participation in the work force since the 1950s. Gingrich had spoken of public housing projects where no residents work but did not name any.